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Content

The report documents the drafting on an 'original article' by Profs Geoffrey Squire and Pietro Iannetta of The James Hutton Institute and provided to TJHI Communication specialists of adaption for popular and mainstream press release in December 2025.

The document presents the original article and source texts, and the final copy of the press release provided to newsrooms.

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Original Article

Last Christmas, I Gave You My Beans

Scotland's Forgotten Food Culture

For centuries, Scotland's midwinter table looked nothing like the Christmas feasts we now unwrap with such enthusiasm. Historically, Christmas was downplayed after the Scottish Reformation; a 16th-century movement that reshaped society, law, education, culture, and even the calendar of winter celebrations. And so it was Hogmanay and not the 25th that carried the season's rituals. In the cold, dark weeks when meat was scarce and the land seemed to wait for spring's return, households turned to humbler, sturdier foods: peas and beans.

Recent scholarship helps us recover just how central these staple crops once were. Alexander Fenton's *Food of the Scots* records that across Scotland, pea or bean meal was routinely mixed with barley to make Bannocks, a dependable winter flatbread for folk of the Lowlands. As late as 1785, beans and peas were still ground together with barley to form nourishing loaves. In Berwickshire in the early 1800s, everyday barley bread often contained a third to a quarter peasemeal or bean-meal, kneaded into a thick round and baked or toasted. In the 1790s southeast, the daily household "bread" was a flat bannock made of barley and peasemeal cooked over the fire. With girdles in use since the 14th century, Scotland had long been a land where the flatbread was not a novelty but a cultural foundation—quiet, unadorned, and essential sustenance through long hard winters.

Scotland's festive foods reflect this same landscape. Take the once-famous Scottish "Black Bun," a dense fruit-and-spice loaf baked not for Christmas, but for New Year. Early references from the Borders describe a dried field bean hidden inside, crowning its finder as "King" or "Queen" of the feast. It was a small moment of joy in the winter darkness, and an echo of medieval bean-regent traditions found across Europe, preserved here with a distinctly Scottish thrift and warmth.

Other customs were humbler still. In some Lowland kitchens, peasemeal bannocks were made on Christmas Eve. A bannock that cracked foretold hardship; one that baked cleanly promised better fortunes. And an old folktale from Ayrshire and Dumfriesshire tells of a 'Guidwife' (female head of a Scottish household), who gave away the last of her peasemeal pottage to a wandering stranger on a stormy Christmas Eve, only to find her pot miraculously full the next morning. In these stories, peas and beans are not simply food, they become symbols of hospitality, charity the fragile hope of midwinter.

A heritage older even than Christmas

The place of peas and beans in winter life stretches far beyond the hearth and bannock. It is part of a deeper agricultural heritage, and one that Scotland has known, forgotten, and relearned in cycles as rhythmic as the seasons themselves.

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For even in medieval times, those who worked the land knew that peas and beans were essential to a healthy rotation. Franklin (1952) records that in the 1400s, the monks of Coupar Angus inserted a kind of early "Christmas clause" into their leases, requiring tenants to follow the Acts of Parliament in sowing wheat, peas, rye, and beans. Though the science was still a *Magnum Mysterium*, experience had taught the monks that soils thrived when crops that drew nitrogen from the air alternated with those dependent on the soil. It was not theory; it was wisdom, and centuries old.

Despite this, and as can happen, good practice slipped away. Through the bleak midwinters of the late 1600s, poor rotations and soil exhaustion deepened hardship and contributed to famine. Something had to change.

By the 1770s, improvement was underway. Landowners, some genuinely benevolent and others simply attentive to their estates, encouraged the reintroduction of legumes into cropping systems. Andrew Wight's vast agricultural survey (1778–84) notes repeatedly, with quiet approval, that "*beans and peas are never neglected in the rotation*." For a time, knowledge was restored; the old ways were honoured.

Yet even this revival faded. By 1898, R.H. Elliott lamented how seldom Scottish fields saw beans, insisting that the most profitable and sustainable rotations combined nitrogen-fixing crops with those that could only draw nutrients from the soil. His warning was well-founded but soon overshadowed. With the arrival of fossil-fuel-derived nitrogen fertiliser in the 20th century, legumes dwindled to their lowest ebb.

And so, where once peas and beans shaped both the soil beneath our feet and the stories told around our winter fires, today we eat beans mostly grown elsewhere; imported, packaged, and far removed from the heritage they once embodied. The global supply chain promises abundance, but at a cost, whispering a wryer, modern refrain: *"Last Christmas we gave you our beans - for a price."*

So, what remains? Individually, these records of bannocks, folktales, monastic leases, and crop rotations seem small. However, together, they form a tapestry of winter life in Scotland: a rhythm of land and table, of necessity and meaning. Before the modern Christmas took hold with its bright lights and imported luxuries, peas and beans stood quietly at the heart of the season. They were nourishment, foresight, generosity, and resilience.

They remind us of values worth keeping; resourcefulness, hospitality, respect for the land, and the hope of getting through another long winter - together.

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Adapted Article:

For Mainstream and Popular Press Release

Peas on Earth: Scotland's Forgotten Winter Foods

Long before turkey, shortbread and mulled wine became the flavours of a Scottish Christmas, the midwinter table was shaped by something far more humble - peas and beans. For centuries they were the dependable foods that saw families through the 'dark season', being nutritious, easy to store, and woven deeply into Scotland's cultural traditions.

Historical records show that across the Lowlands, pea or bean meal was mixed with barley to make every-day flatbreads or bannocks. Cooked on girdles used since medieval times, these breads were the winter staple of many households. On Christmas Eve, some families watched their peasemeal bannock closely. A bannock that cracked foretold hardship; one that baked cleanly promised better fortunes.

Peas and beans also carried festive meaning. Take the once-famous Scottish Black Bun, a dense fruit-and-spiced loaf baked, not for Christmas but for the New Year. In the Scottish Borders, a dried bean hidden inside the New Year black bun crowned its finder 'King 'or 'Queen' for the night. It was a small moment of joy in the winter darkness and an echo of older European winter customs.

Folklore from Ayrshire and Dumfriesshire tells of the Guidwife (the female head of a Scottish household) who gave her last 'pease pottage' to a traveller on Christmas Eve and found her pot miraculously refilled by morning - a reminder that generosity is the true heart of the season.

These foods mattered in the fields as well as the kitchen. Monastic leases from the 1400s required tenants to sow peas and beans as part of a proper crop rotation, what we would now call 'sustainable farming'. Agricultural improvers in the 1700s praised these hardy crops, but their use faded with the rise of artificial nitrogen fertilisers and food system industrialisation in the early 20th century. Today we eat plenty of beans, though most are grown far from Scottish soil – their environmental benefits also forfeit.

Yet peas and beans once shaped how Scotland survived winter, practically, ritually, and symbolically. They were foods of resilience and quiet celebration.

Individually, these records of bannocks, folktales, monastic leases, and crop rotations seem small. Together, however, they form a tapestry of winter life in Scotland: a rhythm of land and table, of necessity and meaning. Before the modern Christmas took hold with its bright lights and imported luxuries, peas and beans stood quietly at the heart of the season. They were nourishment, foresight, generosity, and resilience.

They remind us of values worth keeping - resourcefulness, hospitality, respect for the land, and the hope of getting through challenging times. Together.

Future Perspectives

Future perspectives which will reflect on this article will feature on-line at:

curvedflatlands – food security, environment, sustainable agriculture.

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